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Fertility Transition in China: Causes and Trends

Peng Xizhe

I. Fertility transition in China

Historically, having sizeable families was considered as one of the major characteristics of Chinese reproductive pattern. This was materialised by universal and early marriage. However, the natural fertility level in China was never so high as that recorded in the Hutterites population. According to historical studies, the TFR in the natural fertility regime was around 7–8 in Chinese society¹.

There had been some gradual changes in terms of the fertility desire and fertility behaviour, but the high fertility level was maintained in the first half of the 20th century. The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 ended the decade-long war and brought about peace and social development, which resulted in very high fertility until the mid-1960s, though excluding the period of 1959–1961 when mismanagement and natural disaster caused massive excess mortality and very low fertility (Peng 1987). This demographic crisis alarmed Chinese leadership that the original optimistic view on China's population needed some modifications and resulted in the introduction of birth control services in urban areas.

China's nation-wide fertility transition started in the early 1970s, initialised by the government-sponsored family planning programme. Total fertility rate declined sharply from 5.8 in 1970 to 2.8 in 1979, a dramatic decline in a very short time. While the government programme has played a crucial role in bringing down Chinese fertility, the fundamental changes that have taken place in China's socio-economic structure since 1950 have also undermined the century-long reproductive norms and paved the way to fertility reduction.

It is often assumed that once fertility transition has started, the momentum will maintain and fertility will inevitably reach replacement level (Cleland/Wilson 1987). However, China's marked fertility reduction that occurred in the 1970s did not carry the same rapidity into the 1980s, despite government efforts in implementing the

¹ For example, see Zhongwei Zhao, 'Deliberate Birth Control Under a High-fertility Regime: Reproductive Behavior in China before 1970', *Population and Development Review*, vol. 23, no. 4, pp. 729–767, Dec. 1997.

much more rigid family planning regulation – the so-called »One-Child per Family« programme. The potential for fertility decline created by the socio-economic changes of 1950–70s seems to have exhausted by the 1980s, leading to a TFR fluctuating between 2.3–2.9.

Patterns of fertility transition in the 1980s indicated that China might have experienced two different kinds of fertility decline in these two decades. While the decline in the 1970s was mainly from high to low fertility, the 1980s witnessed a decline from low to near or even below replacement-level fertility. The two kinds of fertility decline should not be considered different merely in the numerical sense. It seems that the early transition is relatively easier and could proceed fast in a very short time period, but the later one is much more difficult and requires a somewhat more fundamental shift in the socio-economic conditions and the value system related to reproduction.

The early 1990s witnessed another nation-wide downward trend of fertility, with the coastal »opened-up« areas at the fore. This new wave of fertility decline certainly benefited from the economic reform and social changes generated by economic development. Moreover, the impact of the re-affirmed government commitment to population control should never be under-estimated. According to the official statistics, the TFR was reduced from 2.3 in 1990 to 2.0 in 1992, and has remained below replacement level since then.

It has been a subject of controversy whether fertility in China was dropping as rapidly as indicated by the official statistics. Some demographers argued that the official birth statistics were subject to serious undercounting (Zeng 1995; Attane/Sun 1999). The State Family Planning Commission might be the only government agency in China that openly admitted the problems in its statistics and tried to correct them. The commission has conducted annual random survey to double-check the quality of population data and made great efforts to improve the accuracy of statistics over the last two decades. Results from these surveys varied widely between provinces and regions. In areas like Shanghai and Jiangsu, it was reported that more than 99 per cent of the births were registered, while underreporting could mount to more than 20 per cent in some other rural locations².

The large-scale rural-urban migration is one of the causes that undermine the data-collecting system for fertility, as the current system is primarily based on the household registration and community administration. It is interesting to note that the total fertility rates of the 1990s that were derived from several national surveys, both conducted by the State Statistics Bureau and the State Family Planning Commission, are consistently around 1.4–1.6 after adjustments, in spite of changes in the

2 As these surveys were conducted in small scales, these data could not be used to represent the provincial features of birth reporting, or to infer to the national pattern.

sample selection and methods of field work³. Such a level is often in contradiction to the public view on fertility and family size. So far, there is not a single estimation of TFR that is widely accepted by the scholars. However, the publicised official figure, claiming TFR to be around 1.7–1.8, in my opinion and also commonly cited by researchers, is not far away from reality⁴.

China launches its family planning programme in the urban areas by providing contraceptive service in the early 1960s, immediately after the recovery from the national famine. Urban couples responded to the government call very positively. By the early 1970s, when the nation-wide family planning programme started, the fertility rate in urban China had already declined to around the replacement level. In other words, urban fertility transition is somewhat at least 10 years ahead of the rural one. While couples in China's countryside are in general allowed to have two children, the one child policy has been rigorously implemented in the urban areas. The total fertility rate for China's urban population as a whole averaged 1.1–1.2 at present. In some large cities, such as Shanghai, the TFR has remained below 1 for many years.

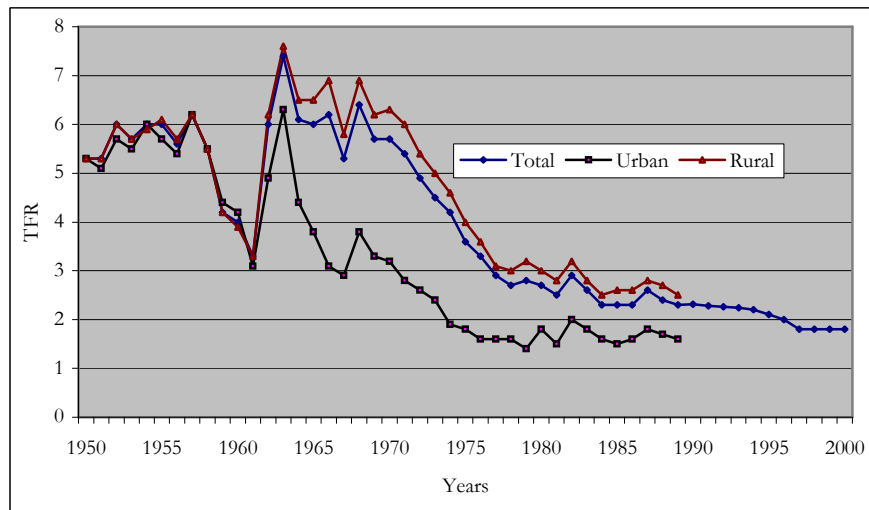


Figure 1: Fertility Trend in China, 1950–2000

(Source: Coale and Chen (1987: 24–9); Feeney et al (1993: 483, 486); Jiang et al (1995: 222–4))

³ These surveys include Fertility Survey conducted by the State Family Planning Commission in 1992, and 1 per cent National Population Sample Survey in 1995 etc.

⁴ In a Chinese Government Directive issued in March 2000, it is merely succinctly indicated that China's fertility was below replacement level. See also Yu Xuejun/Xie Zhenming (2000) (eds.) *China's Population Development Review*, pp. 41–43, Beijing.

There are always marked regional variations in fertility among China's provincial units, but the gap has been narrowing in the recent years. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of provincial TFR in different decades of the second half of the 20th century. It shows that while the means of provincial TFR has declined continuously through the years, the deviation from the national pattern increased at first and reached the peak in the 1970s, and declined thereafter. This phenomenon is clearly associated with the different path of fertility transition among China's provincial units. While big municipalities began their fertility decline as early as in the early 1960s, fertility transition only started in the 1980s in some of the western provinces. Even with this regional variation, it seems clear that there has been a general trend of fertility convergence over time, which is evidenced by the decline of the fertility variance.

Decades	Means	Variance	Standard deviation
1950s	6.176	0.323	0.568
1960s	6.036	0.835	0.914
1970s	3.876	1.751	1.323
1980s	2.280	0.559	0.748
1995	2.198	0.276	0.525
1997–99	1.609	0.212	0.460

Table 1: Statistics of TFR in various decades

(Sources: Peng/Huang, 1993; Chen, 1995; Figure 3)

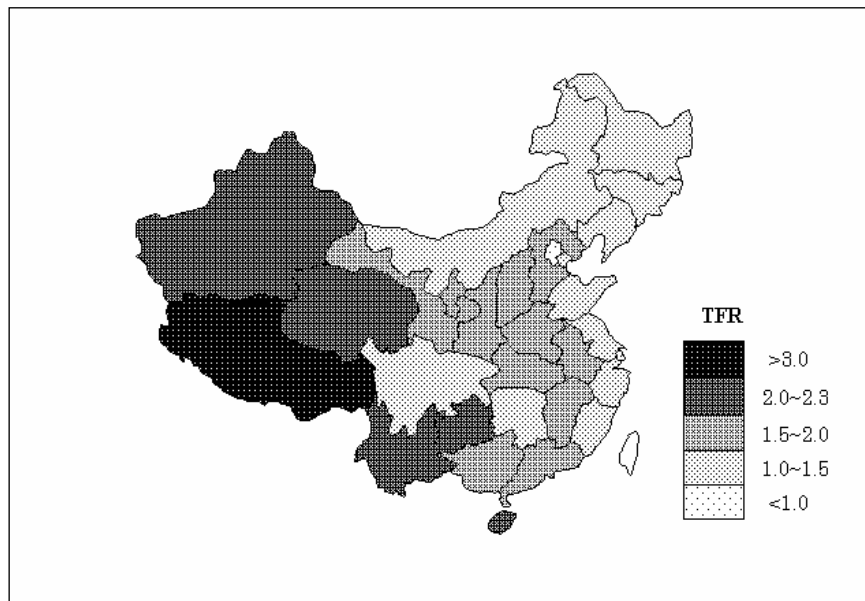


Figure 2: Provincial Fertility Pattern in China, 1997–1999, based on the estimation by China's State Family Planning Commission (data for Taiwan, Hongkong and Macao are not included)

(Source: Based on data collected from National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Survey conducted by China's State Family Planning Commission in 2001⁵)

III. Major determinants of China's fertility transition

Given the characteristics of China's fertility transition, several factors, the government commitment and population programme, the socio-economic development, and reproductive culture, must be taken into consideration in any analysis of future fertility trends in China.

⁵ Detailed information of the Survey can be found in *Data Collection of 2001 National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Survey*, published by China Population Publishing House, 2004, Beijing.

1. The government commitment to population control

China's fertility transition is to a large extent facilitated and determined by government intervention. China's general population policy at present can be described as ›Controlling population quantity, improving the quality of life, and making efforts to solve the aging problem‹. The family planning programme is the core of China's national population programme, which is mainly managed by the State Population and the Family Planning Commission with support from other government agencies and various NGOs.

The success of China's birth control has been heavily dependent on government administrative intervention. The programme was initialised at the first instance by the central government and carried out through a top-down network. Since the late 1980s, a target responsibility system has been gradually established. The system requires that heads of Party organisations and governments at all levels take the full responsibility for implementing the population programme through comprehensive management and co-operation between governmental departments and non-governmental organisations, as well as between different development policies and programmes. It aims to ensure the accomplishment of population plans set up for each locality. Meanwhile, individual cadres' career development and position promotion would be closely affected by their achievements in the family planning work.

The basic principles of the current family planning programme are ›to promote late marriage and deferred childbearing, to encourage people to have fewer but healthier births, to promote the practice of ›one child per couple‹ and to encourage a longer birth spacing for couples who have practical difficulties if they only have one child‹. This policy took a considerable amount of time to develop. In the 1970s, the focus was on later marriage and childbearing (Known as Later, Longer and Fewer), and has gradually shifted to the so-called ›one-child policy‹ since the early 1980s. Meanwhile, the intention for further improvement has never been ceased, even though the Government repeats the confirmation of ›keeping the family planning policy stable‹ each year.

One of the salient features of China's family planning programme is its decentralised policy formation and operation. While the central government proposed the general guidance, it is the local governments, primarily the provincial governments but often down to the village levels, that are responsible for formulating and implementing the programme. In other words, local authorities have been given some flexibility in adapting the national policy in order to accommodate the vast regional

differentials in social, economic and cultural conditions. As a result, the current family planning regulations can be grouped into some major categories⁶.

Group	Major Policy Regulations	Coverage
1	One child with very few exceptions in allowing couples to have two children	All urban residents and rural couples in 6 provincial units including Jiangsu and Sichuan (about 35% of total population)
2	Two children if the first one is a girl	Most rural couples in 19 provinces (about 52% of total population)
3	Two children with a four-year spacing	Most rural couples in 5 provinces (about 9.6% of total population)
4	Two or three children	Minorities in the rural areas of minority autonomous regions
5	No numerical regulation	Rural Tibetan population

Table 2: Comparison of Various Local Family Planning Regulations

(Source: Author's own classification, based on provincial family planning regulations that can be found at <http://www.cpic.org.cn>)

Gu Baochang and his colleagues provided a detailed study of this regional variation in fertility regulations, using mainly the term of policy fertility, which is a weighted average assuming reproductive behaviours of all couples in different locations and of different nationalities following the local government family planning regulations⁷. It estimated that based on the term of policy fertility, about 63 per cent of Chinese families could end up with one child, while 36 per cent could have two children, and only 1 per cent could have more than two children. If all Chinese couples followed local family planning regulations, the total cohort fertility rate in China should be 1.62, but be 1.5 as more Chinese become urban residents. In spite

⁶ Detailed discussion of the issue can be found in Xie Zhenming, »Population Policy and the Family Planning Programme, in Peng Xizhe and Guo Zhigang (eds.) (2000), *The Changing Population of China*, pp. 54–55, Oxford.

⁷ Guo Baochang, et al, »China's Local and National Fertility Policies at the End of the Twentieth Century«, *Population and Development Review*, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 129–147, March 2007.

of local variations, the one-child policy remains a core element of China's fertility policy and continues to have an impact on China's demographic processes⁸.

There are shortcomings, in some cases very serious, like other mass programmes. China's family planning programme is heavily reliant on female contraceptive methods⁹. The programme has been promoted for a long time with insufficient support from other socio-economic institutions. Therefore it has been mainly implemented through government administrative network. The programme required couples to reduce the number of children they produce, but was often unable to provide adequate social support for people to adjust their strategy for family formation and necessary compensation for couples to alleviate life risks in the context of low fertility. The later task is certainly beyond the capacity of the family planning programme. Coercive measures were taken by some local cadres particularly in some rural areas in the 1980s, although the government emphasizes on voluntary acceptance and opposes coercion in general. The relationship between societal interests and individual rights is also an area that needs to be improved.

The Government has focused its efforts mainly in the rural areas to integrate the rural development into the family planning programme. The free election of village-committees may create a better implementation environment to carry out the family planning programme relying mainly on voluntary participation with very limited government intervention. The next few years will be crucial in terms of China's population control.

2. Socio-economic development

China's fertility decline was initialised by a strong and effective government-sponsored family planning programme. Nevertheless, the socio-economic development is certainly another decisive factor facilitating the transition. With the time passing, the importance of the socio-economic factors on the fertility trend has been rising¹⁰.

Rapid social changes have occurred since the late 1970s as the economic reform commenced. But the speed and the profundity of the reform were much more extraordinary after the release of a speech by the top Chinese leader Mr. Deng

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ According to government statistics, male methods accounted for only 14.7 and 13.1 per cent of total contraception in 1994 and 1999 respectively.

¹⁰ For example, Lin Fude and Liu Jinting claimed that during the period between 1982 and 1990, the importance of the family planning programme on China's fertility level decline, while the importance of socio-economic factor almost doubled. see Lin Fude and Liu Jinting, 'China's Fertility Transition and the Prospect of Population Situations', in *Proceedings of the Symposium on Demography of China, 23rd IUSSP general Population Conference*, Beijing.

Xiaoping calling for a fast reform in early 1992. The entire Chinese economy has been moving dramatically from a central planned one towards a market economy. In accordance to this shift, remarkable changes could be easily seen in almost every aspect of society. These changes inevitably mark China's population dynamics and socio-economic development.

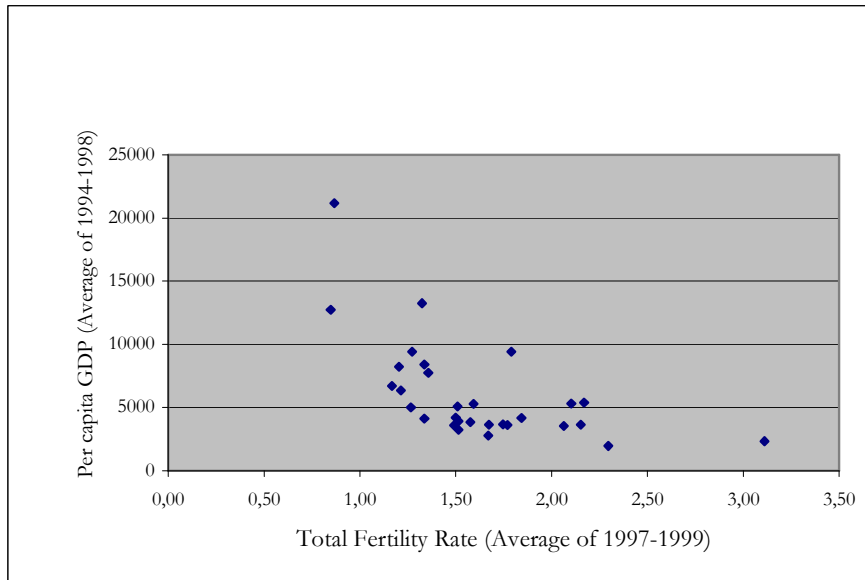


Figure 3: Relationship Between Fertility Level and Economic Development

(Sources: Designed by the author)

As the country's economy is advancing at an unprecedented speed, or even overheated, more people are now involved in commercial activities. In the countryside, more peasants are preparing to leave their land for cities and other places with better economic opportunities. The volume of temporary migration from the rural to the urban or between regions, soared in the last few years and reached 140 million marks. Some people left their rural homeland for the purpose of avoiding birth control regulation, but the overwhelming majority of the migrants move to the urban industrial centres seeking for economic opportunities and personal development. This is certainly affecting people's fertility decisions. In urban areas, job security for urban residents is facing great challenges, and unemployment becomes an every-day phenomenon. Meanwhile, people have got much more freedom to make

their own employment and other life decisions. Chinese people are much more mobile (both geographically and socially) than ever before. This change greatly reduces government's ability to monitor population dynamics, and the family planning programme which used to be a community-based (working units or residential places) programme is facing serious challenges at present. While people are free from the authority of their previous places of work or residence, they are often away from benefits they used to be entitled to obtain, such as free reproductive-health services.¹¹

Absolute poverty has been gradually alleviated. The number of the impoverished population reduced from 100 million in the early 1990s down to 40 million by the end of 1998¹² and further down to 26 million in 2005. The Chinese government is determined to take more resolute actions to solve food and clothing problems for those people living in China's poverty-stricken areas. Poverty is one of the major factors that result in high fertility and resistance to birth control in China's countryside. Poverty eradication, therefore, is certainly to provide relatively better working conditions for China's population programme.

The education level of Chinese people is fairly low compared to many developed countries. The illiterate rate for people aged 15 and over remained at 22 per cent in 1990 and was reduced to 15 in 2000. There have been improvements along with the economic development. For instance, the number of illiterate people aged 15 to 47 has dropped by 4 million annually since the early 1990s when the number was around 35 million¹³. The illiterate rate for this age group has declined from 10 per cent in 1990, to 7 per cent in 1995, and below 5 per cent by the end of the century¹⁴. On the whole, illiteracy is a problem overwhelmingly among the older age groups. 90 per cent of illiterate people are peasants, and concentrated mainly in a few western provinces. The positive impact of education attainment on fertility reduction is well documented by scholars and is also the case for China. It could be reasonably expected that further improvement in education is one of the favourable factors for China's future fertility trend.

With the reform advancing, people's incomes have increased very rapidly, and so is the cost of living, especially the cost of rearing children. Saving for children's

11 This is especially the case for millions of female migrants. China's family planning programme has made efforts to handle the issue with various experiments, such as assigning the destination area to take the major responsibility for birth control management and contraceptive services.

12 Since 1985, China has begun its large-scale poverty alleviation programme. The definition of poverty in China is mainly an economic one based on the per capita annual income. The criterion has changed over time, from 200 RMB Yuan in 1985, to 300 Yuan in 1991, 400 Yuan in 1994.

13 Figures refer to people who are no longer belonging to the illiterate category in a specified year. As a certain portion of the group return to illiterate status a few years later, the sum of these figures should be used with caution.

14 See »China Education Development Plan towards 2010«, Ministry of Education, China, 1996.

education has already been the major consideration that determines consumption behaviour in China. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening. New social stratification is emerging. People are stimulated by the hope of being rich. Under this circumstance, to have many children becomes economically irrational and a burden to social mobility, which in this case imposes a positive effect on people's acceptance of birth control. On the other hand, however, the desire for more children, especially for sons, has come back to some people once they become rich as they would like their offspring to continue their business.

It is too early to draw absolute conclusions regarding the impact of rapid social changes at present on China's population dynamics. While some are beneficial to family planning programme, others may be unfavourable. Some changes undermine the government capacity to manipulate people's reproductive behaviour; some others could facilitate further fertility reduction. In the long run, socio-economic development should make the population control easier. But what will be the case in a period of sudden and sharp change, especially with the larger cohort of fertile women, remains a crucial question to be answered. Efforts must be, and have already been, made to rethink the strategy of China's family planning programme in order to adapt to the changing situation.

3. Changes in family and reproductive culture

In the traditional Chinese society, the family was the soul or the basic cell. The whole nation, the government and the entire society was based on the family structure. Such a culture has gradually changed, and the society is undergoing a very rapid transformation.

The major features of marriage patterns in recent decades for China as a whole can be summarised in four main points.

- (1) The Chinese pattern of universality of first marriage has evidently been continued.
- (2) The age at first marriage increased dramatically in the 1970s, but decreased in the 1980s with a modest scale, and increased again since the early 1990s.
- (3) In terms of the timing of the first marriage, there are significant differences among Chinese cities, towns and rural areas.
- (4) The first marriage of Chinese women has been concentrated in a rather narrow age interval. (Zeng 2000)

However, some radical changes in nuptiality have already emerged, especially in big cities like Shanghai. The proportion of unmarried women in their early 30s increased sharply in recent years in Shanghai, particularly among white-collar employees.

According to fragmental information, about 3 per cent of the women aged 30 remained single in 1997, while the figure was less than 1 per cent in the 1980s. The interval between marriage and the first childbearing increased from 1 year to near 2.5 years, as more young couples would like to spend longer years without the burden of childbearing. The number of voluntary childless couples has also been rising in the recent years. The rising of premarital cohabitation comes along with these changes¹⁵. On the whole, people in Chinese cities are taking a much more tolerant attitude towards marriage and sex activities, although the traditional ethic remains strong. This trend would continue and expand to other regions and social groups as well.

The population statistics show that the average size of a family household is about 3.39 persons at present, a decline of 1.42 persons over the last three decades and compared to the sizes of 4.43 in 1982 and 4.05 in 1990. The number of children per household decreased from 1.49 in 1982 to 1.12 in 1990, 97 per cent of which could be attributed to the reduction in births. The nuclear family has taken an important place, and this pattern is gradually expanding in society. However, the stem family holds as the leading pattern in society and most of the elderly still live with their adult children. The intra-family relationship has been changing to be much more equal between generations, while the traditional pattern of parent domination, especially in terms of marriage and childbearing, is gradually given away. This provides much more autonomy for the young couples to make their own reproductive decisions with less intervention from their parents than there used to be.

The Change in marriage and family patterns is partly brought about by the past fertility transition. Meanwhile, it also affects the fertility desire and behaviour of the young generation. Based on survey reports, the average desired family size (the number of children) varied narrowly between 1.6–2.5 over time and across regions. It means that a large family is no longer the desire of Chinese people. Some may argue that many of these replies from the interviewees were biased by the policy enforcement. Nevertheless, one can be sure that 'two children per family' has been the widely desired family size regardless of rural-urban stratification. The Chinese family has already become very small – on average it is about 1.7 children per family – but in the urban area the figure is even lower standing at slightly more than 1 child per family. In Shanghai it is only 0.8 children per family.

The dynamic is multidirectional. On the one hand there has been a roll-back to traditional family forms and family norms in the recent years. On the other hand there is a tendency towards diversified family forms and social norms, such as

15 Unfortunately, there are no solid data on the afore mentioned new phenomenon. But interested readers could find many TV series, novels, and other media materials touching on this issue.

single-parent families and DINK families. This is particularly true as millions of »single child« reach the age of marriage and childbearing. The younger generation nowadays has become much more mobile and independent. This creates a lot of problems in terms of the parents-children relations and the socialisation of a single child. Also linked to this issue are future family functions, family relations and family structures. While the sex activity was strictly refrained within marriage in the traditional Chinese society, one has gradually been disconnected from the other. While changes in family patterns and public views on the family are results of China's family planning programme and fertility transition over the past several decades, they have also created favourable social conditions for the sustainability of China's fertility transition.

4. Gender equality and Women's Status

Since the 1950s, Chinese women's societal role has been transformed considerably, and the saying »women hold up half the sky« has been taken seriously. The pursuit of gender equality has been regarded by the State as one of its central political goals. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China stipulates that »women enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of life, political, economic, cultural and social, including family life«. In addition to that, the Marriage Law, the Inheritance Act, the Electoral Law, the Criminal Law, the Compulsory Education Law etc. have also made detailed stipulations on women's relevant rights and worked out measures for the protection of those rights. In April 1992, China's National People's Congress adopted the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests which consisted of 9 sections and 54 articles. This law provides a comprehensive guideline to and protection of Chinese women's legal rights with regards to political and social life, culture and education, work, property, marriage and family and so on. The Law was modified recently to adapt to the new situation in China.

There are not only the laws and regulations which protect women's basic rights, but also many social and economic measures that are particularly made for the purpose of gender equality. Consequently, women's status in China, especially in urban China, is high by international standards (Greenhalgh 1991). Chinese women are better off, in terms of health, labour force and political participation, than women in many other developing countries. There are, nevertheless, large regional and rural-urban differences. Even within the urban areas, there exists a marked difference between women who hold permanent urban registry and those who do not.

In comparison to their rural counterparts, women that hold permanent urban registry enjoy much more privileges. Most of them are covered by the social security system, receiving government subsidies or welfare provision for housing, medicare

and other maternal benefits. Their economic participation was secured by the government during the rapid fertility decline before the 1990s. On the other hand, women who migrated to urban areas and have not received their urban registry are in a quite different situation.

As China is rapidly transforming from a centrally planned economy to a market economy, many new issues have been emerging for both of these two groups of women, but the problems that they face remain quite different. For »native« urban women, many privileges that they used to enjoy are now in question. For migrant women, the priorities are survival and adaptation to urban environments, rather than advancement.

There are always contradictions between women's production and reproduction responsibilities. Although both work and motherhood are considered important roles for Chinese women, popular attitude tends to favour the latter role as being the primary one (Peng 1989). Before the 1980s, this contradiction was largely resolved by government intervention, and the production cost entailed by the women's reproductive role was basically borne by the State, or the entire society. Women's freedom to work was materialized in a mechanism of »big iron bowl«.

There has been substantial equality in labour force participation between the two sexes, even though sex differentials persist. This holds true particularly when China is compared with other Asian countries (Ogawa/Saito 1987). In theory, women workers receive the same wages as their male colleagues in the same position. However, the opportunity for job promotion and occupational structure for men and women are quite different. The average income of urban female labour is around 70 per cent of their male counterparts, which is mainly caused by different retirement arrangement and job segregation¹⁶.

The incompatibility between women's productive and reproductive roles has become more serious with the progress of the economic reform in China and the establishment of a market economy in which efficiency rather than equality is becoming the major concern of society.

The reform of the labour market, especially the restructuring of large state-owned companies has been carried out widely. The general purpose of this measure is to improve efficiency and reduce deficits. As a result of the move, a relatively large proportion of unfit workers are transferred, either towards staying at home waiting for jobs or towards other economic activities which require less training and skill. As the entire labour force faces this challenge, women workers are in a much more vulnerable situation. The number of unemployed women has increased substantially, and they are threatened by unemployment more often than their male counterparts.

16 The legal retirement age is 55 years for women and 60 years for men.

This continuous fertility decline greatly reduces the childbearing burden on urban women, prolongs women's potential working life, and reduces the risk of maternal mortality. However, the responsibility for population control has been taken over mainly by Chinese women, while men contribute very little and have made very limited efforts in this regard, which can be seen from the pattern of contraceptive-use.

China's family planning programme is heavily reliant on female contraceptive methods. By promoting the use of IUDs and female sterilization as preferred methods of contraception, the burden for achieving China's demographic goals has been disproportionately placed on Chinese women. This obviously adds to women's reproductive duties, meanwhile reducing their ability for production.

At present, an overwhelming majority of urban retired people are entitled to old age pensions provided mainly by the State. Public provision of social security has been established, but the coverage is very limited. Consequently, family support is very much encouraged by Chinese culture and the government. In other words, the Chinese family remains a basic source of old age support, especially in terms of care and service. Most adult offsprings would like to take good care of their senior parents or parents-in-law, but they often have to make a choice between the support of the elderly and the pursuit of their own career. Moreover, the responsibility of family support for the elderly lies, and will be more likely to continue lying, on the shoulders of women. Survey reports indicate that while elderly women depend more on daughters and/or daughters-in-law, elderly men mainly depend on their spouses for daily care. This increasing burden for family care of the elderly may offset what urban women gain from the fertility transition, and may jeopardize their careers outside the family. While women have more freedom to participate in the social and economic activities of society due to the shortened period for childbearing as a consequence of the rapid fertility decline, family support for the elderly may draw women back home. Very little attention has been devoted to this issue so far.

IV. Discussion and Conclusion

In December 2006, the Chinese government issued a directive to reaffirm its commitment to population control, which was a follow-up to the similar government statement in 2000¹⁷. It also indicates that the present population policy will be maintained in effect for the coming years, allowing some minor modification. In this

17 »Decision on Strengthening Population and Family Planning Work, Maintaining low Fertility«, Directive issued by CCCP and the State Council, 2nd March 2000.

context, together with the findings from earlier sections of the paper, the government population policy will decide the basic level of China's fertility, at least for the early 21st century. The deviation from this line will be determined jointly by the ability of the government to implement its policy and programme, the impact of development in China's social, economic and political reform, and people's general desire for family size. Meanwhile, people's volunteer participation and free determination will play much more important roles in determining the future fertility level in China.

The transformation of government organisations and functions is under way. The basic idea is to make the government focus on certain important issues, and society will take care of the remaining things, or so-called 'small government and big social services' in Chinese. The government system is undergoing a profound restructuring process. This change may not directly affect the quality of contraceptive service, but may make it more difficult now to keep people working for the family planning programmes as job security reduces. Together with other administrative restructuring measures, this shakes the foundation of China's current family planning programme since it has been largely depended on an effective administrative system. Another development in the political field is the direct election of the village management committee that is responsible for the daily operation of China's Population programme. The election itself would reduce the occurrence of coercion and increase the volunteer participation.

There are concerns about the vulnerability of China's fertility transition and the possibility of fertility rebound if the government, either voluntarily or forced to, loses control on population issues. On the other hand, the optimistic view takes into account the determination and capacity of the government in carrying out family planning plus the significant impact on people's reproductive behaviour of the fundamental changes that have occurred in China's society and economy since the opening and reform.

At the launch of the One-Child-Policy, the intention was made clear that this should be a policy measure for a period of only 20 to 30 years.¹⁸ After more than 20 years of implementation, it has met its primary objective to slow down China's population growth. On the other hand, there are also profound socio-economic and demographic consequences. Current policy debates have concentrated on these issues, including rapid process of population aging, abnormal sex ratio at birth, and reproductive health etc.

18 See *Guanyu kongzhi woguo renkou zengzhang wenti zhi quanti gongchan dangyuan, gongqing tuanyuan de gongkaixin* (An Open Letter to All Members of the Communist Party and Communist Youth League), Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party, 25th Sep. 1980.

China is perhaps the first major country to become old before it becomes rich. Although China is now ranking number four in terms of the total GPD in the world, per capita GPD in China is only less than 2000 US Dollars. In that sense China is still a large developing country. On the other hand, all aging indicators show that China has already entered the stage of population aging and the process is accelerating in a much more rapid speed. The aging in China is much earlier than many developed countries, or compared with India, Brazil or other major developing countries. Chinese society and the family will have to adapt to this changed situation.

Despite all the shortcomings, China's family planning programme has been supported at large by the public. On the whole, it has brought about dramatic changes in people's fertility behaviour in a relatively short period of time, and successfully slowed down the rapid population growth in China, which also has profound impact on the stabilisation of the world population. The deepened involvement of China in the globalisation of world economy may further facilitate the introduction of new and more effective birth control methods. There have always been gaps between the targets of the programme and its public acceptance, but the gaps have been reduced with the time passing. The norm of having a small family has been widely accepted by the public, especially in those advanced regions and among the »single-child« generation. The reproductive behaviour of that generation will determine the future fertility level for China in the 21st Century.

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